

**How do the aesthetic abstractions that occurred due to the technological  
limitations of early pixel-art RPGs parallel and contrast the artistic  
intentionality found within the pursuit of Representational Abstract Art?**

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## **Contextual Review: *Representational Abstract Art***

This paper will be concerned with the correlation between the intentionality of abstraction in representational abstract art, and the aesthetic abstraction that occurs through necessity due to technological restraints found within older video games, specifically the early 90s for the case of this study. It is my aim to dissect the pursuits of these vastly different forms of art, and discern what game designers can glean from the differences or similarities that get uncovered between them.

In order to connect the fields of abstract art and video games in this manner, it is important to establish four key facets of representational abstract art: what representational abstraction is, how representational abstraction is achieved, the reason behind the pursuit of abstract art from an artist's perspective, and the relationship abstraction within the arts has on its audience.

Abstract art in its simplest form is a style of art that in some way shape or form is independent from what we directly perceive in our physical world (Rise Art, 2021). Within the broader scope of abstract art lies representational abstraction, which Anna Moszynka defines in her book “Abstract Art” as a form of art where “the artist selects a form and then simplifies it until the image bears only stylized similarities to the original, or is changed entirely beyond recognition.” (1990, p. 7) Some of the ways that artists can achieve this form of abstraction include but are not limited to: distortion, simplification, and exaggeration (Hummel, 2024).

On the reason behind the pursuit of abstraction, abstract expressionist Osnat Tzadok states that it gives them “the freedom to create. No boundaries, no rules, no limits to what my mind, soul and hand can express and achieve.” (2012) The pursuit of abstraction being a pursuit of freedom within the arts is a sentiment that is also shared by fellow abstract artist Andrew Conway-Hyde, expressing a feeling of liberation in the exploration of “complex feelings without the constraints of realism.” (2024) With these accounts it becomes apparent that abstraction in the arts is in itself liberating for the artist.

It is also key to examine the role of the audience as well. In the same interview with Andrew Conway-Hyde, he places himself within the shoes of the observer, finding “emotional depth that abstraction can convey, allowing for a more personal interpretation.” (2024) From his perspective, abstraction, and in turn representational abstraction, is as personal and liberating for the audience as it is for the artist, due to its departure from our visual reality.

To further compound this, Dee Reynolds’ “Symbolist aesthetics and early abstract art” greatly concerns itself with the importance of imagination within the arts, with Reynolds stating that one of the book’s principle aims is “to reinstate imagination as a central concept in literary and art criticism.” (1995, p. 1) Within the first section of the book, titled “Imagination and Imaginary Space,” (1995, p. 8 - 40) Reynolds provides a profoundly thoughtful exploration of not only the role of imagination in the arts, but the core of what imagination is: a process of perception where the end is not the image directly perceived in front of you. The most consequential takeaway, for the sake of this research, is the argument that art, no matter how seemingly self-referential or autonomous, exists to engage the audience’s imagination.

Taken in conjunction with Andrew Conway-Hyde’s perspective on the audience within abstract art, what comes to light is that the liberation at the core of the audience and artist’s experience within abstract art, is the imagination argued within Reynolds’ work. Thus we can conclude that abstract art, and representational abstract art alongside it, is crafted with the express intentionality of evoking that imagination.

## **Methodology:**

With the grounds for representational abstract art established above, I can now begin applying it to the field of video games. In order to do this, I will be covering one of the most acclaimed RPGs of all time, in accordance with many publications such as Famitsu, IGN, Eurogamer, and many more, that game being: Final Fantasy 6.

The analysis will focus on a single moment: that being the famed Opera House sequence, a moment where one of the game's core characters express their most heartfelt emotions through a theatrical musical opera performance. This will be dissected through the game's two prominent versions: The initial 1994 Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) release, and the 2022 pixel remaster, the most modern and accessible means to play the game. The differences between this moment within these two versions, how they affect the respective audiences, and how they were affected by their restraint or lack thereof will be heavily considered, and then cross-examined with the foundation laid about representational abstract art within the contextual review.

Through the juxtaposition of this one scene within these 2 versions, my aim is to examine the impact of modernity and increasing technology on the abstraction caused by the restraints on the original release.

## Case Study: *Final Fantasy 6*

### Version #1: The 1994 SNES Release



This screenshot was extracted from a playthrough of the Opera House scene in the SNES version of Final Fantasy 6 which can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwHrOdC02FY&t=182s>

Final Fantasy 6 has been the recipient of endless praise, from being labelled as “incredibly sophisticated” (Harris, 2007) to “rich, complex, and gripping.” (Giant Bomb, 2009) This opera house sequence is a large part of that acclaim, being lauded as a “stunningly beautiful artistic achievement capable of bringing tears to your eyes,” and “something that had to be seen and played to be believed.”(Den of Geek, 2021)

To provide a short summary: Celes, one of the game’s core characters, begins to feel in touch with her humanity after a life of war and servitude. At the height of her self reflection, she gets cast as the lead in an opera performance, as the player guides her through a song that perfectly reflects the current state of her heart.

It presents a truly profound expression of the character’s very essence through the medium of theatre, yet its technological limitations dictate that it expresses that profundity through pixel art and chiptune music with no

audible lyrics. To quickly define pixel art and chiptune music: pixel art is art presented at the pixel level, where artists would manually arrange every pixel on screen by hand to create an image due to technology constraints. (Lischinski, 2009) Chiptune music was similarly born of technological constraint, and was a form of “electronic music that uses the microchip-based audio hardware of early home computers and gaming consoles.” (Marquez, 2014)

That brings us to the principles of representational abstract art that were mentioned above within the contextual review. As stated there, the main means of achieving representational abstraction are through distortion, simplification, and exaggeration. The aesthetic presentation of Final Fantasy 6 can be very clearly discerned as simplified abstraction, which in short definition, is “simplifying a form to its basic shapes and colors”. (Hummel, 2024) The pixel art is not meant to be directly indicative of what the audience is perceiving, rather it is an evocative yet simplified abstract representation of Final Fantasy 6’s grand fantasy world, which is exactly how Dee Reynolds defines imagination and abstraction, in their book “Symbolist aesthetics and early abstract art.” The same precedent applies to the chiptune music. Despite the scene depicting a character performing at an opera, there is no audible singing, instead the electronic chiptune music plays a melody that is an abstracted representation of Celes’ singing.

However, despite following the principles of abstract art, when looking at the reasoning behind the pursuit of abstract art that was posited in the contextual review, a discrepancy becomes immediately apparent. This abstraction was not out of an intentionality on behalf of the team behind Final Fantasy 6’s SNES release, rather it was entirely out of necessity due to the technological restraint. Yet it still manages to achieve the same result on behalf of the audience, with the sequence being stated to far transcend the audience’s wildest imagination (Den of Geek, 2021), and being hailed as a shining example of the value of abstraction, requiring the player’s mind to fill in many of the gaps as they guide Celes throughout this performance (Nintendo Life, 2022).

With that being said, how does this sequence change with a more modern interpretation, one bereft of the original’s technological restraint?

## Version #2: The 2022 Pixel Remaster



This screenshot was extracted from a playthrough of the Opera House scene in the Pixel Remaster version of Final Fantasy 6 which can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kd0t7vHzmZg&t=171s>

The Pixel Remaster made several key changes specifically to this moment in the game. For one, the visuals are no longer presented in the flat simplified 2D pixel art of the original, rather this moment received special treatment and was remade from the ground up Square Enix's HD-2D engine, which places 2D characters in a 3D environment (Rice, 2022).



Screenshot taken from Nova Crystallis' review of the Final Fantasy 6 Pixel Remaster, for reference as to how the game looks like outside of the special HD-2D remake the Opera House Moment received. Found at: <https://novacrystallis.com/2022/03/final-fantasy-vi-pixel-remaster-review/>

The audio also saw a similar and special upgrade, going from chiptune music, to fully voiced with voice actor Hannah Grace delivering the performance and singing as Celes. This was specifically requested by the original game's composer, Nobuo Uematsu, which was revealed in a public Youtube interview translated by RPGSite in 2022.

The Final Fantasy Pixel Remasters were created with the express purpose of “keeping the same feel that the original pixel sprites had” and to be played “in a consistent way.” (Square Enix, 2022). Yet despite that, exceptions were taken within this highly acclaimed moment specifically, to greatly reduce the audiovisual representational abstraction of the original work.

Upon providing his input on the vocals within the Pixel Remaster of the game, Nobuo Uematsu states, that experiencing the Opera House with vocals from different languages brought him to tears and that unveiling of the original's abstraction was “the correct way” to have gone about it (RPGSite, 2022). This also extends to the rest of the Pixel Remaster’s soundtrack, which was remastered in an orchestral manner, with the official Square Enix FAQ stating “We arranged the tracks in a way that ‘reproduced’ or ‘re-expressed’ areas of the originals, that we were unable to achieve due to the limitations on the hardware at the time.” (2022)

Thus we land on the striking irony behind this study: as technology has progressed, creators within the video game artform have taken this newfound freedom born from a lack of technological restraint and expressed it through a reduction in abstraction, allowing the audience to directly experience the final image on the screen in front of them rather than requiring imagination. This stands in complete contrast behind the freedom, stated in the contextual review, that governs the pursuit of abstraction in the abstract arts.

## **Conclusion and Reflection:**

Through the juxtaposition of early pixel-art RPGs and the pursuit of representational abstract art, this study has illuminated the paradox at the heart of technological advancement in games. While representational abstraction within abstract art is often a deliberate choice born from a desire to evoke emotional and imaginative responses through the simplification and distortion of reality, abstraction in early video games, as exemplified by Final Fantasy VI, emerged out of necessity. Yet, despite its unintentionality and restraint, the pixelated visuals and chiptune audio of the original 1994 release achieved a comparable impact as the intentionally crafted abstract arts: they compelled the audience's imagination to bridge visual and auditory gaps, creating a deeply personal and emotional experience.

However, the Pixel Remaster's modern reinterpretation of the Opera House sequence reveals a fundamental shift. In its effort to restore what the developers view as a truer version of the original vision, it strips away layers of abstraction through high-fidelity graphics and fully voiced performances. This deliberate reduction in abstraction stands in contrast to the liberating ethos of abstract art, where freedom is exercised through abstraction rather than its removal.

As a game designer, this raises an important insight: abstraction, whether intentional or circumstantial, can be a powerful conduit for audience engagement, enabling personal interpretation and investment born from imagination. Embracing abstraction as an expressive choice, and not just a technical limitation, may offer designers richer, more emotionally resonant pathways to the ways we can communicate with our audiences. Just as artists abstract from reality to evoke something deeper, game designers can leverage abstraction to activate the player's imagination in ways that high realism often cannot.

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